

Robinson Jeffers

Selected Poems



Robinson Jeffers

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Jeffers was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania (now part of Pittsburgh), the son of Reverend Dr. William Hamilton Jeffers, a Presbyterian minister and scholar of ancient languages and Biblical history, and Annie Robinson Tuttle. Incredibly precocious, Jeffers was fluid in German and French (he studied in Europe) by the age of the twelve as well as versed in the Greek and Roman Classics. Jeffers obtained his B.A. from Occidental College at the age of 18 and then moved on to study at the University of Southern California. He started an affair Una Call Kuster, then married, in 1906 — it was discovered in 1910, at which point Jeffers studied for a semester in Seattle before returning to Los Angeles. The two married in 1913 and moved out of the city, settling finally in Carmel where Jeffers built Tor House and Hawk Tower. Jeffers's career went through years of finding national fame but also periods where the controversy over his opinions — notably concerning World War II — hurt his reputation. Jeffers's first book, *Flagons and Apples* (1912), written in metrical verse, is very much the work of a novice. His second, *Californians* (1916) contains some of the flowing, long-lined verse for which Jeffers became famous, but also includes some relatively metrical poems like the one included in his volume that reflect his time in Southern California.

Flagons and Apples. Los Angeles: Grafton Publishing Company, 1912.
Californians. New York: The Macmillan company, 1916.
Tamar and Other Poems. New York: Peter Boyle, 1924.
Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925.
The Women at Point Sur. New York: Liveright, 1927.
Cawdor and Other Poems. New York: Liveright, 1928.
Dear Judas and Other Poems. New York: Liveright, 1929.
Descent to the Dead: Poems Written in Ireland and Great Britain. New York:
Random House, 1931
Thurso's Landing and Other Poems. New York: Liveright, 1932.
Give Your Heart to the Hawks and Other Poems. New York: Random House,
1933.
Solstice and Other Poems. New York: Random House, 1935.
Such Counsels You Gave to Me and Other Poems. New York: Random House,
1937.
The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers. New York: Random House, 1938.
Be Angry at the Sun and Other Poems. New York: Random House, 1941.
Medea. New York: Random House, 1946.
The Double Axe and Other Poems. New York: Random House, 1948.
Hungerfield and Other Poems. New York: Random House, 1954.
The Beginning and the End and Other Poems. New York: Random House,
1963.

Noon

Hot waves of the ancient waters drone
Against the shore ancestral hate.
Their dull, relentless monotone
Is as the very voice of Fate.

What madness kindles in my head.
What God lays violent hands on me
That the high sun is perfect dread,
And perfect terror the flat sea?

The blazing noon is like a load
Insufferable, too hard to bear.
O wild and cruel and occult God
Have mercy on thy worshipper!

Epilogue

I have known as a boy may, sorrow and love,
Lust and thirst, desire and despair;
But the thoughts that I wove my verses of
(I beg you to notice) are not the same
As the thoughts I have lived for myself; but came
From the flame on the hearth, and the lightning flame,
And the sea, and the sun, and the summer air.

For our country here at the west of things
Is pregnant of dreams; and west of the west
I have lived; where the last low land outflings
Its yellow-white sand to the edge of the bay;
And the west wind over us every day
Blows, and throws with the landward spray
Dreams on our minds, and a dreamy unrest.

The westward sea and the warm west wind—
It was these, not I, that wrought my rhyme.
I, that have lived, and sorrowed, and sinned,
Have spoken no word of my life as it is;
Have spoken only the ocean's abyss,
Only the open waves, that kiss,
And climb on the cliff, and fall, and climb.

Let them climb, and fall, and climb, as they will;
It is one to me, who have made what I might
Of long loves gone wrong, and light loves gone ill,
And loves of fools, forlorn and forgot,
And loves of men that witches have caught,
And loves enough, God wot; but not
The loves I have lived, nor the life I could write.

Emilia

I

The old heart of the world is changed not with its dress.
Give thanks to God; and presently read on.
—High on a lovely hill, which cypresses
And somber eucalypts had overgrown;
And eastward from its height Los Angeles,
Or rather of her lights the untimely dawn,
Was seen at nightfall; but the daytime breeze
Brought ever the sharp breath of western seas;

II

And at the hill's foot, thrusting forth her piers
Like water-roots, Redondo not content
Numbers her shipping; and beyond appears
The inviolable eternal element,
Lapped in that azure mantle which it wears
Unfaded from the morn of time; and bent
Perfectly like a crescent, the bay reaches
South, and far north, on foam-wet glistening beaches:—

III

High on this far-viewed hill, and over-spired
By cypresses, and locked with tangled boughs
Of live-oaks and the eucalypts; retired
Into a sober distance which allows
But murmurs, as of insects evening-choired,
From shore and harbor, stood her father's house.
White-fronted and flat-roofed it was, with small
Grilled balconies before the windows tall.

IV

It looked straight westward; when the sun declining
Stood flushed above the far verge of the seas
In a sky of amber and rose, his level shining

Cast the slim shadows of the cypress trees
Like ribbons up the wall, with darkness lining
The deep-set casements and the balconies;
While gleamed with sunset colors glorious
The window-panes, as fire were in the house.

V

Low down against the wall, yet vine-like too,
With sudden upward reaches as of flame,
Rich and full-flowered with yellow and orange, grew
Streptoslen bushes, and their blossoms came
Up to the window-ledges, clinging to
The rough and cream-white plaster; and these same
Climbed the broad door-posts of the central door
On trellises unseen, and arched it o'er.

VI

Beyond the driveway wall and hedge of privet
Tall dahlias answered the streptoslen bushes
In color:—as the liquor of high Glenlivet
Finds new youth in a worn man's veins, and flushes
His overshadowed cheek—or brandy'll give it
The same ambrosial ardor: so these gushes
Of lively color lit the house and park,
Which cypresses and blue-gums made so dark.

VII

But there was fragrance too, that quietly crept
Across the narrow paths, among the stems
Spiring or gnarled of tufted trees, and swept
The lawns, with trailing as of silken hems
And whispering; or at windless nightfall slept
Against the doorstep. Like a miser's gems
Were hid the little gardens whence flew forth
Such deep sweet breathings of the tranquil earth.

VIII

Scarcely the gardener, old John Williamson,
Though his pipe drew well of a morning, and the gout
Forgot to twist his knuckles, could have known
Where were the little plots, nor found them out
For tending; gentle Emilia, she alone
Had planted them, and knew the paths about
Their secrecies, and came in summer eves
With water; and she loved their least of leaves.

IX

Her gardens—how should any but herself
Number? or know the blossoms growing there?
Her pansies, each the quaint face of an elf
Lifting from shadow, whispering to faint air
Their faintest odor—on a sunny shelf
Of earth a live-oak's knotted knees upbear
Her gay verbenas} half ashamed to fret
With color-wealth pale-wanded mignonette 1

X

That grew near by—her violets under a ledge
Where the hill cropped out with rock and downward slanted
Into rich crevices—and in the hedge
Her sweet-briar roses carefully transplanted:—
Sweet-william too she kept} that used to pledge
The breeze from cups of spice—her plots not wanted
Snowfall of sweet alyssum,—and had scope
For phlox and basil and dwarf heliotrope.

XI

Like a young Goddess who with love requites
And nurture} the swung censers and sweet vows
Of worshippers and priests and acolytes,
She passed at twilight from the garrulous house
(Now that the yearning veiled autumnal nights
Set early in) and under obscure boughs
Swift darkness felt her all alone, not lonely,

Fin ding her charges by their fragrance only.

XII

Autumn is not the rich and mournful close,
With us who dwell against the sunseting,
Of the year, ere winter and the cerecloth snows
Enwind him, a pale slumberer until spring:
Here autumn is a traveller's brief repose
At heat of noon; he sleeps not; he will fling
The vine-leaves in a moment from his brow,
And run, refreshed with wine—for even now,

XIII

This side the nearest milestone, companied
By laughing shepherd Fauns who pipe the flocks
To fruitfulness, by wanton girls dove-eyed,
By that old kindly Satyr who still mocks
And loves too,—cometh she, the longed-for bride,
Even she above whose dark wet shining locks
Burns like a star the whole year's desire, even Spring,
Veiled in soft rain,—with joy, with blossoming.

XIV

This night it seemed to Emilia she was here
Already, though October had not rounded
His brother's late-born crescent, that swam clear
Of cloud in middle heaven; but clouds abounded
On all the wide circumference; nor could peer
More than four stars or five, and these confounded
Dizzily by the moon-rays that outmeasure
Her islanded estate of straitened azure.

XV

“The night is warm, the rain will come to-night.
There is no wind but many clouds; all day
The sun threw doubtful beams, and milky white
Through mist on the blue bosom of the bay;

No dew is fallen at all; the air is light;
The ocean's tones are clear but far away.
O come, rain, come, sweet rain, fall softly and bring
To me and to my little flowers the spring!

XVI

The hill-slopes are all gray and wait for you
To weave them lustrous robes of living green.
The trees grow faint with drinking the thin dew;
Leaves wrinkle, meagre limbs are bare between.
The sky is tired of being always blue.
The ways are deep with dust: O wash them clean!
And all my blossoms though well tended cry
Wistfully for the waters of the sky!"

XVII

Thus prayed Emilia, not with open lips,
But longingly at heart. For she was one
Who held to the ancient first apocalypse:
As the pure sons and daughters of the dawn
Prayed nor to images, nor fellowships
Of Godheads on a mountain, nor withdrawn
In heaven one God nor three; but worshipped rather
Kindlier powers,—the sun, their lofty father;

XVIII

Deep-bosomed earth, their mother; and the wind,
The rain, the sheltering hills, the moving sea:
Even so Emilia, not with conscious mind,
I think, but by deep nature, reverently
Regarded the great elements, inclined
Her heart before the first—and verily
The only visible—Gods;—and found her prayer
As often answered as most others are.

XIX

But the fifth night it was. From set of sun

The gentle night was three hours old; the hearth
Nourished a blaze—no winter-crackling one—
Emilia's dear two sisters with their mirth
Were noisier. She, her evening tendance done,
And loved communion with the pensive earth,
Was joined with them. The sudden heavenly gift
Upon the window panes a-pattering swift

XX

Resounded: then the first-born of the three
Who sat within, laughed suddenly and said,
“At least to-night the boy won't visit me
Francis, I mean: there's nothing stirs his dread
Like driving on wet roads, since the evening he
Skidded and toppled over. Now, instead
Of sitting two and two, for once we'll spend
The evening like three sisters—with no friend.

XXI

Are you not glad, Emilia?Jj But that third
While Flavia spoke had vanished from the room.
“Where is the girl?—Where is she going?”—They heard
Down the long panelled hall the house-door boom,
Closing. They ran and opened: soft rain purred
On all the leaves without; through murmurous gloom
Faint perfume of untimely blossoms crept;
And in a haze of rain the garden slept.

XXII

They called; and when she answered not, returned
Wondering to the hearthside. In the night
Beneath the trees Emilia walked, and yearned
As solemnly as ever anchorite
To his high phantom-God: but she discerned
The God of her desire—for silvery-white,
Beating the long clear grass like one who danced,
Bacchanalian, silver-footed, gleamed and glanced

XXIII

In the slant window-glimmer the sweet rain,
And hissed among the leaves, and pattered on
The ghostly gravel walks; and like a stain
Across the radiance of the moon was drawn
In luminous clouds; and failed; and fell again,
Wetting the tall-stemmed dahlias autumn-wan;
And from the eave-troughs with a gurgling sound
Gushed; and was sucked in by the thirsty ground.

XXIV

What ails the maiden thus to walk afield
In the wet cold discomfortable dark?
The field-squirrel now is in his cave concealed,
Even in its driest depth; the meadowlark
Hugs what small cover a few wild mustards yield;
The fat wood-grub has burrowed under bark;
The slug finds shelter under a wet stone:
Why walks Emilia roofless, she alone?

XXV

Because she loves—because she worships—yea,
What can the maiden do and how express
More wholly her devotion? All astray
She casts her streaming hair; she will not less
Than give in gratitude her soul away
Unto the cool kind torrents: now her dress
Is loosened at the throat, and on her breast
Numberless silver kisses are impressed.

XXVI

Now slip her garments backward—who can watch
In the wet night, and she well hidden behind
Her friendly trees?—she loosens the gold catch
Of the pin at her bosom; and the blind
Quick fingers of the raindrops, from the thatch
Of upper leaves wind-shaken, soon can find

And play upon her shoulders glistening bare
Between the mingled strands of her dark hair.

XXVII

No eye is under all the darksome trees;
No step to frighten virgin modesty;
The world is housed: now, if the maiden please,
May she not walk and play conformably
To her desire and beauty? Piece by piece
Her raiment slips from off her, and with glee
Naked she stands, and free and without stain,
Mixing her tender body with the rain.

XXVIII

Anon she dances.—Thus a young doe-fawn,
One that has never known the stag, nor stood
Beneath his weight of love, about moon-dawn
Leaps in a lonely clearing of the wood
For love of her own lightness; far withdrawn
She dances in the mountain solitude;
Yet, should but a bird cry, how far she flees
Into the darkness of the taller trees!

